



# Introduction to United States Military Records

Cara Jones  
FamilySearch International

*"Veterans are a symbol of what makes our nation great, and we must never forget all they have done to ensure our freedom"*

-Rodney Frelinghuysen

## Objectives

You will be able to:

- Understand the genealogical value of military records.
- Acquire a general understanding of military structure and conflicts.
- Identify four key military record types used for family history research.
- Learn how to determine if an individual served in the military.
- Discover valuable resources to locate military records.

## Introduction

### What are Military Records

Military records identify individuals who served the United States as members of the armed forces, or who were eligible for service.

### Why use Military Records in your genealogical research

- Millions of individuals (men and women) have served in the armed forces over the course of United States history.
- Military records provide valuable genealogical information such as birthplace, parents and sometimes other family members, physical description, occupation and service details such as rank, promotions, combat service, medical issues, etc.
- Military records can be the first genealogical source that documents an individual as a legal adult.

### What you need to know to begin research in Military Records

- The conflict in which the individual possibly participated in.
- The state from which the individual served.
- The military branch where service was rendered.

*Numerous indexes have been created and are a great resource to aid you in identifying these details.*

# Military Organization

## Five Military Branches:

- **Army** – Founded in 1775, initially called the Continental Army, created from coordinated efforts of the thirteen colonies to fight against the British in the American Revolution.
- **Navy** – Began in 1775, initially called the Continental Navy, Naval Act of 1794 established a permanent standing U.S. Navy.
- **Marine Corps** – Founded in 1775, a component of the U.S. Navy since 1834.
- **Air Force** – Began in 1907 as part of the U.S. Army, military aviation divided between Army, Navy and Marine Corps, created as a separate branch in September 1947.
- **Coast Guard** – Founded in 1790, initially called the Revenue Cutter Service, created to prevent smuggling and enforce federal tariffs and trade laws, 1915 act of Congress created the U.S. Coast Guard.

*\*For the purpose of this class we will focus on the Army branch of the military*

## Basic Military Vocabulary:

- **Artillery** – soldiers working with field pieces
- **Cavalry** – soldiers on horseback
- **Infantry** – soldiers on foot

## Military Unit Groups:

- **Squad**-Small unit consisting of approximately 10 soldiers. Leader = Sergeant. In the Artillery this unit is referred to as a Gun.
- **Platoon**-4 Squads. Leader = Lieutenant. In the Artillery this unit is known as a Section.
- **Company**-4 Platoons (130 to 150 soldiers). Basic elements of all Battalions. Leader = Captain. Artillery Corps refer to a Company as a Battery. Cavalry units refer to a Company as a Troop.
- **Battalion**-A blend of Companies, approximately 400 soldiers. Leader = Major or Lieutenant Colonel.
- **Regiment**-A blend of Battalions, approximately 2000 soldiers. Leader = Lieutenant Colonel or Colonel.
- **Brigade**-3,000 – 5,000 soldiers, a blend of Battalions. Leader = Colonel or General.
- **Division**-At least 3 Brigades, approximately 10,000 – 12,000 soldiers. Leader = Officer of the General ranks.
- **Corps**-Largest tactical unit in the Army. Approximately 2 to 5 Divisions. Leader = Officer of the General ranks.

Squad  
 Platoon  
 Company  
 Battalion  
 Regiment  
 Brigade  
 Division  
 Corps

## Timeline of Conflicts

Timeline of Major United States Conflicts	
War	Years
Colonial Wars	1637-1774
Revolutionary War	1775 – 1783
War of 1812	1812 – 1815
Mexican War	1846 – 1848
Civil War	1861 – 1865
Indian Wars	1780s – 1890s
Spanish-American War	1898
Philippine Insurrection	1899 – 1902
World War I	1917 – 1918
World War II	1941 – 1945
Korean War	1950 – 1953
Vietnam War	1964 – 1972

## Key Record Types

### Complied Military Service Records (CMSR) – “Service Records”

- These records document an individual’s service in the military and can state the person’s unit. They consist of an envelope containing card abstracts taken from various military records such as enlistment papers, muster rolls, pay vouchers, etc.
- Service Records can contain the following genealogical details: name, residence, date mustered in and out, unit, occupation, age and birthplace, physical description, medical and military service details.

### Pension Records

- The federal government (and some states for the Civil War) granted pensions to war veterans and/or their dependents (example: widow’s pension). Not all veterans that served applied for or received a pension.

- Pension Records may contain supporting documents for the individual's military service details, affidavits, depositions from witnesses and family records such as marriage certificates, birth and death information, personal letters and even pages from a family bible.

### **Bounty Land Warrants**

- The federal government issued bounty land grants for those who served in wars from 1776-1855 (Revolutionary War, War of 1812, Mexican War and Indian Wars).
- Bounty Land Warrants may contain the same information as described for Pension Records. Many of these Bounty Land Warrant applications for the Revolutionary War and War of 1812 have been combined with the pension files.

### **Draft Records**

- Beginning in 1863 the federal government (1862 for Confederate soldiers) has registered millions of men who were eligible to serve in the military.
- Lists those who served or were eligible to serve.
- These military records may contain the following genealogical details: name, age, birthplace (sometimes the town in birth country), residence, marital status, occupation and physical description.

Key Record Types				
War	Bounty Land	Service Records	Draft Records	Pension Records
Revolutionary War	X	X		X
War of 1812	X	X		X
Mexican War	X	X		X
Civil War		X	X	X
Indian Wars	X	X		X
Span-Am War and P.I.		X		X
World War I		X	X	
World War II		X	X	
Korean War		X	X	
Vietnam War		X	X	

## Determine Service

- The 1840, 1890, 1910, 1930 and 1940 censuses all ask about war veterans.
- The 1900, 1910 and 1920 censuses include specific columns for those serving at military installations, ships and hospitals.
- Some state censuses also ask questions about veterans on their enumerations.
- Other sources that could provide clues to military service are county histories, tombstone inscriptions, family records, and service and/or pension indexes.
- Consider an individual's birth year for possible military service.

Birth Years for Possible Military Service		
War	Duration	Years of Birth
Revolutionary War	1775 – 1783	1715 – 1767
War of 1812	1812 – 1815	1752 – 1799
Mexican War	1846 – 1848	1788 – 1832
Civil War	1861 – 1865	1801 – 1849
Indian Wars	1780s – 1890s	1720's – 1880's
Span-Am War and P.I.	1898 – 1902	1838 – 1882
World War I	1917 – 1918	1858 – 1900
World War II	1941 – 1945	1881 – 1927
Korean War	1950 – 1953	1890 – 1935
Vietnam War	1964 – 1972	1905 – 1955

## Locating Military Records

### Online Resources

- FamilySearch.org
- Ancestry.com (\$)
- Fold3.com (\$)

These three websites contain the digitized military records for the major periods of conflicts of the United States. They also have numerous indexes that can assist in identifying service members. Some of the databases have digitized records that can be downloaded, while others simply list an individual in an index. For service members that are only listed in an index, their military records will need to be ordered from the appropriate physical repository.

Physical Repositories to Identify Military Records		
Repository	Records	Years Covered
National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Washington, D.C.	Federal service, pension, bounty land and draft records	1775 – 1916

<b>www.archives.gov</b>		
<b>National Personnel Records Center (NPRC)</b> <b>St. Louis, MO</b> <b>www.archives.gov</b>	Federal military records not available at NARA	1917 – present
<b>U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center</b> <b>Carlisle Barracks, PA</b> <b>ahec.armywarcollege.edu</b>	Historical source material for the U.S. Army	1789-present
<b>State and Local Archives</b>	Military records for individuals who served in state militias and National Guard units	1775 – present

## Limitations

- Some records are housed on a federal level and others on a state level. Examples would include state militia records for the Revolutionary War and pension records for the Confederate Army. Neither is housed on a federal level and would need to be located on the state level. This may include searching state historical societies and/or archives.
- In November 1880 there was a fire in the War Department building and many records from the Revolutionary War were burned. The National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) fire in 1973 burned 80% of the Army's service records from 1912-1960 (includes Army Air Corps) and 75% of the Air Force's service records from 1947-1964, starting alphabetical after James E. Hubbard.

## Online Resources:

- FamilySearch: <https://www.familysearch.org/en/>
- Ancestry, Military Records: <https://www.ancestry.com/search/categories/39/>
- Fold3: <https://www.fold3.com/>
- National Archives and Records Administration (NARA): <https://www.archives.gov/>
- U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center: <https://ahec.armywarcollege.edu/>